

DO YOU BEGRUDGE MY GENEROSITY?
Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 20,1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

The gospel we know means "good news," but what is this good news? That Jesus' Father is not the God of religions; the God of religions is the one who rewards each according to his merits, rewards the good and punishes the wicked. Jesus presents a completely different God: he speaks of a good Father who makes his sun rise above the wicked and the good, it does not depend on whether they deserve it or not, but because they need it; and he even makes it rain on the just and the unjust.

This message, this novelty is not well accepted by the disciples and it is to them that Jesus addresses this important parable of the vineyard owner. Let's read it. *“...the kingdom of heaven..”* meaning the alternative society proposed by Jesus – *“.. is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.”* Normally this role belonged to the foreman, why does the owner do it? To indicate urgency. *“ After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.”* Here is the money which was a 4 gram silver coin and was the usual wage of the day workers.

Then the evangelist writes that *“And going out about the third hour..”* why? Those who he had hired were sufficient for the work, but the master does not look at his own need, but looks at the need of the workers. *“.. he saw others standing idle in the marketplace,..”* they are not unemployed because they do not want to work, but because they have not found work, *“.. and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too,..”* Again, he does it not for his own needs, but for their

needs. And with these he does not grant a denarius, but he says “*..whatever is right I will give you.*” And then again he goes out around noon, around three, what is surprising is that he goes out towards five o'clock. In the east, sunset occurs around that time, at half past four or five, at that moment the work ceases; why does the owner of the vineyard go in search of workers when the work is almost over? And he again calls them to work and they say “*.. no one has hired us.*” He said to them, ‘*You go into the vineyard too.*’

And here's the surprise: “*And when evening came,...*” and here the evangelist makes us understand that it's about God - “*..the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.*” The last ones, we have seen, have practically made a presence because they had arrived at the end of the work and, with great surprise, they are to be given the money for a day's work. The evangelist writes “*And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius.*”

It is logical that those who had worked since the first hour, since dawn, seeing that the last who had done practically nothing ,they expected to received more, but they too received each one denarius. So they began to murmur against the owner “*These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.*”But the master replied to one of them and said” *Friend,...*” three times in Matthew’s gospel Jesus addresses himself by calling a person “*friend*” and it is never a good moment; he calls Judas“*friend*” and two other people always guilty of something. He says “*I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go*”

And here is the generosity of the master. “*Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.*” Here is the novelty that Jesus presents: the Father does not give according to people's merits, but according to their needs. This is the novelty of the good news of Jesus.